DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 102 682 EA 006 803

AUTHOR	Thomson, Scott; Stanard, David
TITLE	Student Attendance and Absenteeism. The Practitioner, Vol. 1., No. 1.
INSTITUTION	National Association of Secondary School Principals, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	Mar 75
NOTE	13p.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1904 Association Drive, Reston, Virginia 22091 ($0.50, single copy, Quantity discounts, Payment must accompany orders)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.76 HC Not Available from EDRS. PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS	*Attendance; *Attendance Patterns; Average Daily Attendance; Demonstration Programs; Discipline Policy; Governance; Research; School Attendance Legislation; School Holding Power; *Secondary Education; Truancy

ABSTRACT

Excessive absenteeism is a complex and continuing secondary school problem with personal, institutional, economic, and social causes. Issues of excused or unexcused absences and age of majority are complex and largely ignored by research. Research indicates absenteeism is positively correlated with the second semester, boys, older students, one-parent families, low grades, and students with low personality ratings by teachers. Cohesive families, college preparatory programs, high grades, and extra-curricular activities positively correlate with better attendance. Exemplary programs reflect strong policies that are cooperatively and consistently developed and well publicized. Nine schools with positive attendance policies are described. (DW)

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL BY MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
NASSP
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER

ED102682

EA 006 803

The Practitioner

A Newsletter for the On-Line Administrator

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Vol. 1, No. 1 March 1975

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Student Attendance and Absenteeism

Problem Continues

Student absenteeism continues to be a serious problem for the secondary school administrator. In 1973 and again in 1974 NASSP members rated poor attendance as their "most perplexing student problem" by a ratio of two to one over discipline, the second most frequently mentioned difficulty with students. These ratings come from NASSP's annual poll of its members on school organization and curriculum.

Many secondary school principals express an open concern that rising absenteeism will cause chronic institutional anemia. With teachers, counselors, and administrators pushed into spending increased time just to manage the attendance situation, less opportunity remains for more constructive tasks. The quality of teaching, counseling, and administering can easily be affected by a landslide of attendance minutia.

Assuming a school year of 180 days, health officials estimate that a "normal" absentee rate would be seven to nine days for each student. Translated into percentages, the expected rate would be four or five percent per year. (Students who would exceed this rate because of long-term illness would amount to less than one percent per year of the total enrollment.) Today, however, absentee rates of 10 to 15 percent are not uncommon. In some urban schools, the rate exceeds 30 percent.

A Complex Problem

While absenteeism can be a symptom of an inadequate curriculum, analysis indicates that this is only one of many causes. Numerous schools with broad and flexible programs continue to face severe attendance problems. Obviously, growing absenteeism has deep roots leading in many directions. The causes are personal as well as institutional.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Contributing to poor attendance may be family attitudes, social forces, peer pressures, economic circumstances, home-school relationships, school size, student age, and health.

Among the "new" causes cited for the dramatic growth of student absence are winter vacations, erosion of parental control, economic affluence, novel life-styles, and a breakdown in court enforcement of attendance laws.

Whatever the contributing causes, student truancy invariably becomes the subject of informal discussions whenever school administrators meet. Expensive and time consuming, it is of ever-present administrative consequence.

School personnel, of course, understand that the problem extends into adulthood. Job vacancy is of a growing consequence to the business and professional world. But the imperative to schools for attendance still exists. On the practical level, student attendance is required by law in every state but one. On another level, dependability is a trait admired (and rewarded) in society generally and thus is a value that schools should nourish for the benefit of students.

Excused or Unexcused

Some school districts, because of the rush of student absenteeism, no longer differentiate between excused and unexcused absences. This change has come because school officials feel that many written excuses are no longer reliable. Checking out each excuse would be an impossible expenditure of time.

Under a system that does not differentiate between excused and unexcused, students are allowed a specified number of absences each marking period (or year) for each course. Should this number be exceeded, the school closely follows up on all successive absences. Course credit usually is denied if absences continue. Before the specified number is reached, warning notices are sent home. Also, teachers are encouraged under this system to maintain parental contact if a student's attendance pattern is creating class problems.

Recently this approach to attendance was brought to the attention of the New Jersey Commissioner of Education.[1] The Commissioner was asked to rule on whether the attendance policy of the Burlington, N.J., Board of Education was arbitrary and unreasonable. The policy denied credit to any student absent from a given course for 30 or more days.

Nine students who had not received diplomas under the policy were petitioners in the case. The Commissioner upheld the Board of Education decision on eight of the nine petitioners, directing the Board to grant a

1 William J. Wheatley, *et al.*, vs. Board of Education of Burlington, N.J. Commissioner of Education Decision, Sept. 23, 1974.

diploma to one student. The Board policy was then set aside. However, it was set aside not because the policy was unreasonable and arbitrary. Rather, it was held to be overly lenient. The Commissioner's comments on student attendance and compulsory schooling are most instructive:

> Frequent absences of pupils from regular classroom learning experiences disrupt the continuity of the instructional process. The benefit of regular classroom instruction is lost and cannot be entirely regained, even by extra after-school instruction. Consequently, many pupils who miss school frequently experience great difficulty in achieving the maximum benefits of schooling. Indeed, many pupils in these circumstances are able to achieve only mediocre success in their academic programs. The school cannot teach pupils who are not present. The entire process of education requires a regular continuity of instruction, classroom participation, learning experiences, and study in order to reach the goal of maximum educational benefits for each individual child. The regular contact of the pupils with one another in the classroom and their participation in well-planned instructional activity under the tutelage of a competent teacher are vital to this purpose. This is the well-established principle of education which underlies and gives purpose to the requirement of compulsory schooling in this and every other state in the nation.
>
> In the judgment of the Commissioner, the Board's policy of permitting pupil absences for whatever reason, up to 30 instances, in each subject matter class, impedes and impairs the State policy for compulsory schooling. The length of the academic year for pupils in the public schools of this State averages approximately 182 days. Given such a limited number of school days for pupils, any local policy which condones, excuses, or encourages any absences by pupils, constitutes a derogation of the long-standing State policy for compulsory and maximum attendance at school . . . .
>
> The Commissioner is well aware that the Board's purpose in adopting the controverted policy was to shift the responsibility for classroom attendance to the pupils and their parents. The Commissioner is also aware that this Board and every other local board of education experiences difficulty in enforcing compulsory attendance requirements, and that school administrators expend a great deal of time and effort in this task. Notwithstanding these kinds of reasons, the public schools have the consistent obligation to require that their pupils be present in school in order that they may be taught. This policy is for the benefit of the pupils, their parents, and the community at large.

BEST COPY AVAILABL

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The Age of Majority and Attendance

Some educators feel that, with the age of majority changing from 21 to 18 years, the attendance picture will become even more blurred. The age of majority, however, has no direct impact upon attendance requirements.

School administrators have the right and the responsibility to establish reasonable rules for school governance. Requiring school and class attendance certainly may be interpreted as being reasonable for the granting of credit. No rationale exists for a school to maintain one set of attendance policies for those students who have reached the age of majority and another for those who are not yet 18 years old.

The age of compulsory attendance, however, does affect a school's legal responsibilities for requiring the presence in school of youth of a certain age. Schools normally have an obligation to report to the courts those students who do fall within the age of the compulsory attendance laws. All other students attend school by choice. All of these other students, however, still must abide by the policies that govern the institution generally, including those affecting attendance. Special off-campus programs for older students such as work experience or various senior options would, of course, fall within these general policies of the school.

In schools where written excuses from home are part of the established policy on student attendance, the new age of majority may cause some change in procedures. While legal opinion may vary by state, the general trend seems to be toward an interpretation that allows students of age 18 to write their own excuses from school. If "majority" implies a legal emancipation from parental control, written excuses from parents cannot be required. One adult, a parent, would not be required to write an excuse for another adult, a student. The freedom of being an adult has its concomitant responsibilities, however. Adulthood implies taking the responsibility for one's actions, and adult students who do not adhere to reasonable school policies regarding attendance should be expected to accept whatever consequences a poor attendance record may imply.

An alert school administrator will anticipate problems that arise from procedures that no longer require parental approval where majority-aged youth are concerned. Prudence suggests that schools inform parents about the implications of the age of majority with regard to attendance. Attendance information might well be part of a packet of materials for both students and parents which clarifies all matters (e.g., student records) relating to majority attainment. A mailing to parents at the end of their student's junior year or at the beginning of the senior year might be considered. Furthermore, meetings of junior or senior parents for a discussion of these new circumstances would be helpful to all concerned.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The accuracy of records will become more important with the advent of open access to records and with the implementation of the rights of majority. Notes concerning student absence may become more significant than ever, as a matter of record, and should ordinarily be required of majority youth as well as of parents.

Research on Attendance

Although the trend toward poor attendance has been apparent for some time, research is in short supply. Few investigations have been made. This is most unfortunate, as attendance represents an area in need of thorough analysis.

One valuable study on attendance has been generated by Joseph Levanto, principal of the Norwich Free Academy, a large public high school in Norwich, Conn. Although his study focused upon the design of a systematic method for the identification and analysis of factors related to absenteeism at Norwich, his procedures permitted a broad look at absences for a period of five years.

The basic sources of these data were individual student records, as well as information provided by students relating to their home environment. Attendance records, student grades, and personal information on students enrolled for each of the five school years were fed into a computer that related patterns of absenteeism to such factors as class, sex, age, parental employment, number of parents living at home, I.Q. scores, programs of study, school activities, race, language spoken at home, religion, class rank, and the student's personality.

For the purpose of the study, absenteeism was defined as missing school for an entire day. Period and/or class cutting were not considered. No differentiation was made between absences considered to be excusable by the school and those considered not excusable.

Although the study was undertaken in but one large high school, the findings are of general interest for a broad audience of secondary school administrators. The heterogeneous nature of Norwich Free Academy should make the findings applicable to a large number of high schools throughout the nation.

Among the findings:

- Absenteeism is on the increase. Absenteeism rose during each succeeding year of the five years studied.[2]
- Second semester absenteeism is higher than first semester absenteeism.
- Days of important tests experience a low rate of absenteeism. Moreover, there is a decline in absenteeism during the week of semester final examinations.

---

2 The State of Florida reports a drop in average daily attendance for each of the last five years, as well. Other data corroborate this general picture.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

- The first and last days of the week have the highest rates of absenteeism. Wednesdays and Thursdays are the days when absenteeism is lowest. Absenteeism on Fridays is usually lower than on Mondays.

- Boys in the first three years of high school generally have lower rates of absenteeism than girls at the same grade level. Senior boys have a slightly higher rate of absenteeism than senior girls.

- With each succeeding class and age group, from the ninth grade through the twelfth, absenteeism increases.

- Students who live with both parents generally have a lower rate of absenteeism than those who live with one parent or guardian.

- Students in the "college preparatory" program generally have the lowest rate of absenteeism followed by students in the "business education" and the "general program" respectively.

- For senior students, absenteeism generally is lowest for students with the highest I.Q. scores and for students with the highest class ranks in academic achievement.

- Students who participate in school-sponsored athletic and non-athletic activities generally have lower rates of absenteeism than those who participate in but one or none of these activities.

- The poorer the student's personality rating by teachers (on a scale developed for the study), generally the higher the rate of absenteeism.

The Levanto findings generally were confirmed by James Nelson of Evanston Township High School, Evanston, Ill., in a 1972 study entitled "Student Non-Attendance, Class Truancy, and Failure at the Secondary School Level." A major difference in the Nelson study concerned days of the week with high incidences of absenteeism. At Evanston, a school on modular scheduling, the highest rates of absenteeism occurred on Tuesday and Thursday, those days with the fewest scheduled classes. Nelson found a strong correlation between high rates of absenteeism and failing grades, as well.

Levanto's study suggests a number of options to schools wishing to do something about absenteeism. These include:

✓ Ask teachers to telephone the home if a student's attendance pattern is creating academic problems. Calls from teachers are much more effective than those of counselors, deans, or principals.

✓ Schedule special events on Mondays and Fridays to encourage attendance. Activities or programs, a shortened day, or an earlier than usual dismissal time on Friday could be considered. Monday and Friday absenteeism may be encouraged by not scheduling special events and activities on those days.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

- ✓ Expand the educational alternatives open to students to include community service and other action-learning programs.
- ✓ Establish counseling groups for the chronically absent.
- ✓ Inform students that employers will ordinarily contact the school for attendance data. Although the confidentiality of student records is now protected by law, a prospective employer may refuse to consider an application if the student will not authorize the school to release the information requested.

Looking Toward Solutions

In late spring, 1974, when responses to the annual NASSP exemplary programs poll indicated that attendance was once again highest on the list of administrator problems, the Research Department decided to identify schools which were making headway on curbing absenteeism.

First, all state executive secretaries and NASSP coordinators were asked to identify schools which were taking action to resolve attendance difficulties. A pool of over 50 schools was identified. Second, each identified school was sent a short questionnaire requesting a summary of attendance policies and procedures, to include backup data (better attendance, improved grades, less cost, etc.).

The policies of these schools frequently had been developed because student absenteeism was interfering with the educational process and had become a heavy administrative burden. As yet no school feels that it has the "final word" on attendance. Certain common themes, however, are present in most of the successful policies:

- The policies are strong. When little or nothing is done about attendance the problem gets worse. Schools making headway on attendance are schools which expend considerable thought and effort to solving the problem.
- Participation in the formulation of attendance policy is broadly based. Administrators, teachers, students, and parents frequently are involved in policy making.
- Policies clearly specify in writing attendance expectations and delineate the outcomes of good and poor attendance.
- Policies are well publicized. Each parent and student repeatedly has been informed of attendance requirements.
- Policies are consistently enforced. At each level of enforcement—teacher, counselor, dean, principal—compliance with the policy is expected.
- Immediate follow-up on absences is made by a letter, a telephone call to the home, or some other means.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Attendance Policies That Work

Although the attendance policies forwarded to NASSP have several common features, the responding schools fit no single mold. They are urban and rural, large and small. They represent all parts of the United States. Their common feature is a dedication to finding an acceptable solution to the problem of student absence. Many have cut their truancy rates in half.

The policies of these schools generally can be categorized into eight approaches. Some schools use two or three approaches simultaneously to improve attendance.

The eight categories are:

1. transferring chronic truants to alternative schools or programs,
2. exempting students with good attendance from final examinations,
3. withholding course credit for excessive absences,
4. lowering student grades for excessive absence,
5. enlisting volunteers to telephone the home of each absentee and the offices of working parents,
6. mailing weekly or monthly attendance reports to each home,
7. appointing school-court coordination personnel to gain a better partnership between the courts and schools,
8. suspending or expelling for excessive truancy.

Numerous variations exist on these themes, community by community. Schools simply take the approach that makes the most sense for local conditions.

This report on attendance assumes that concurrent efforts are made to attract students with interesting and appropriate curricula. Unfortunately, attractive programs often are not sufficient within themselves to reduce absenteeism significantly. Therefore, the focus here is upon the management of attendance, specifically.

Description summaries of representative schools follow. NASSP members are invited to send copies of their attendance policies, together with the results of these policies, to the NASSP Office of Research if they are substantially different than those reported here. These policies will be placed in the exemplary file for use by the membership.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

To Illustrate

Boulder High School, Boulder, Colo. 80300
John Hoback, Principal

Under Colorado law, students over age sixteen cannot be suspended or expelled for truancy. The only legally recognized penalty for poor attendance is denial of course credit.

The Boulder Board of Education policy permits parents to keep their students out of school for any reason, with students allowed makeup privileges. Moreover, students with parental consent are free to negotiate individual attendance with each teacher according to student needs and the demands of the class. The school recognizes three categories of parental permission.

Category 1: The student is completely responsible for attendance.

Category 2: The parents are to be notified if student attendance is leading to classroom problems.

Category 3: Parents expect student to attend class and wish notification for each absence.

Lake Oswego High School, Lake Oswego, Ore. 97034
Norman Riggs, Principal

Policy provides that absences are excused only if they have been prearranged or if there is student illness, family illness, or an emergency. Otherwise, a student is expected to attend every class period every day. Attendance is taken each period.

Truant absences result in a grade of zero for all classes missed. Truancies are handled as follows:

- First truancy: notification of parents
- Second truancy: one-day suspension and parent conference
- Third truancy: three-day suspension and notification of county attendance officer
- Fourth truancy: informal hearing to discuss possibility of student expulsion

These procedures are strictly adhered to. Absenteeism has dropped from 11 percent to five percent in the past three years.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Presque Isle High School, Presque Isle, Me. 04769
Romeo Marquis, Principal

All students are required to be in regular attendance for all classes and study halls except in cases of illness or emergency. Since many students forge notes, notes from home have been eliminated. Considerable attention is given to home phone calls. Many parents call in the morning if their student is to be absent or tardy. When calls have not been made to the school, the school calls the home. Warning notices are sent home in severe cases. Absenteeism has dropped two to three percent in the past three years.

A number of school districts use volunteer "phone brigades" to telephone homes and working parents rather than using written procedures.

Evanston Township High School, Evanston, Ill. 60204
Philip McDevitt, Associate Superintendent

Board policy requires that students aged sixteen or older may be transferred into evening high school with five or more unexcused absences. Evening High School operates four nights a week, with 24 subjects offered. Students are not transferred to Evening High School for misbehavior, only for truancy. Students may return to day school when attendance at Evening High School is good for one semester. The majority of students, however, prefer to remain and graduate from the evening school.

For all day school students, grades nine through twelve, interim reports on attendance and behavior are mailed home at the fifth week of each quarter. Positive as well as negative behaviors are marked on these reports to supplement the attendance picture.

Outreach workers go to the homes of chronically truant students for parent conferences.

Leavenworth Senior High School, Leavenworth, Kan. 66048
Donald L. Jacka, Principal

Policy states that attendance at school is the responsibility of students and their parents. The responsibility of the school is to provide instruction and to inform parents of absence from class. Parents are contacted by telephone on the fourth day of absence from any number of classes and by registered letter at the eighth absence. If time permits, telephone calls are made prior to the fourth absence.

A student must report to his teachers either before or after school to receive makeup assignments. Teachers may require that all time missed be made up. Time lost due to authorized activities need not be made up.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

No makeup assignments will be given during class time. The absence rate has dropped from 10 percent to five percent. Only five percent of administrative time is spent on attendance.

Similar policies are followed by Niles North High School, Skokie, Ill., except that weekly attendance reports are mailed to parents, and by McKinley High School, Honolulu, Hawaii, where absences are reported to homes by increments of five.

Cody High School, Cody, Wyo. 82414
Charles Mitchell, Principal

Absences are excused for illness, medical appointments, school activities, and for circumstances prearranged by the parents. Parents are to call the school for each absence. If a call is not made, the student is suspended for four periods for each class period missed. After the third suspension, a student is dropped from the roll for the semester. Unexcused absences have dropped fifty percent. A similar approach is used by Hampton, N.H., where course credit is not granted to students who are absent for more than 25 percent of the class time.

Howe High School, Howe, Tex. 75095
L. H. Linker, Principal

Howe High School uses a combination of attendance records and scholastic average as a basis for excusal from semester tests. Students with zero, one, and two excused absences from a class may be exempted from taking the test if they maintain averages of 75 percent, 85 percent, or 95 percent respectively. There is no exemption for three or more excused absences or any unexcused absence. Attendance has increased from the already high figure of 94 percent to 96 percent since implementation of the policy. Harrison County High School in West Virginia uses a similar approach, excusing students with three absences or less from semester tests.

Hannibal High School, Hannibal, Mo. 63401
Roger H. Nelson, Principal

Under the Missouri State Compulsory Attendance Law the principal is required to check out cases of truancy, extended absenteeism, irregular attendance, and dropping out. After each case has been investigated, a referral may be made to the School Community Court Coordinator.

It is the responsibility of the School Community Court Coordinator to serve as the liaison between school, home, community, and juvenile department in all cases of attendance which have been referred by principals. Close personal contact with the students and their parents is an essential ingredient of program success. During the 1973-1974 school year 60 percent of the dropouts returned to school and 50 percent of the students with attendance problems showed marked improvement.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Chaparral High School, Santee, Calif. 92071
C. R. Hoberg, Director

Chaparral is a continuation high school serving the Grossmont Union High School District. It enrolls 420 students, most of whom left the comprehensive high schools of the District because of problems relating to poor attendance.

Chaparral uses a number of motivational factors to improve attendance. These include: (1) Students select the hours of school attendance, (2) Parents of absent students are telephoned daily, (3) School faculty visits homes, (4) Pretests are given in math and English to diagnose needs, (5) Extracurricular activities were expanded to include physical fitness classes and social affairs, (6) The career development specialist expanded student work stations, (7) A car pool file was developed, (8) Close contacts were developed with the welfare and probation departments of the County.

Average daily attendance is now 385 students, or 91 percent in a group that at one point was considered to have marginal dropouts from school.

This paper on attendance was developed by Scott Thomson and David Stanard of the Research Department of NASSP.

Appreciation is expressed to Joseph Levanto of the Norwich Free Academy, Norwich, Connecticut, for use of materials from his doctoral dissertation entitled *The Identification and Analysis of Factors Related to Secondary School Absenteeism*, written at the University of Connecticut in 1973.

Schools with successful attendance policies significantly different than those described in this paper are requested to send information about these policies to the NASSP Research Office, 1904 Association Drive, Reston, Virginia 22091. Thank you for this cooperation.

The Practitioner is a publication of the Research Department of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1904 Association Dr., Reston, Va. 22091. *The Practitioner* is distributed quarterly without charge to all NASSP members. Additional copies may be ordered: single copies, 50¢ each; 2-10 copies, 30¢ each; prices for larger quantities on request. **Payment must accompany orders of $10 or less.**

Allan D. Walker, *President, NASSP*
Owen B. Kiernan, *Executive Secretary*
Scott D. Thomson, *Associate Secretary for Research*
Thomas F. Koerner, *Director of Publications*
Martha Christian, *Assistant Editor*